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SOME ABORIGINAL ROCK PAINTINGS IN THE ROEBOURNE-HAMERSLEY RANGE AREA

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This is the second of the articles describing some of the Aboriginal rock art of the North-West of Western Australia. The first dealt with the rock engravings, or petroglyphs (Wright, 1964), and this one will give an account of the rock paintings, or pictographs. The paintings are much rarer in this area than are the engravings.

It appeared, until late 1963, that the paintings were confined to a few isolated sites along the north of the Hamersley Range for about 40 miles east and 25 west of the asbestos-mining town of Wittenoom, and I knew of no engravings within this area. There is, however, at least some overlapping of the areas where the two types occur. I have since seen paintings outside the Hamersleys, on Hooley Station and in Gregory Gorge, and engravings within the Hamersleys at Kalamina Gorge and Dale's Gorge. There is also a report of engravings in Yampire Gorge (Davidson, 1952: 112).

Altogether, I visited seven painting sites. The positions of most of these are shown in the locality map in my previous paper (*W.A. Nat.*, 9, p. 98). I failed in three attempts to reach the paintings shown as Site 21—Bee Gorge—but there were two further finds in Gregory and Kalamina Gorges, which are not shown on that map.

Although some of these paintings might have been known locally to a few station people, doggers and prospectors for many years, they were quite unknown to anthropologists till very recently. None of them are mentioned in Davidson's 1952 survey of Western Australia.

Wittenoom Cave. Plate 1, nos. 1 and 2.

(a) *Location.* The town is at the mouth of Wittenoom Gorge, where it opens out on the north side of the Hamersley Range. The paintings are in a cave at the base of the Range, not much more than a mile east of the town. A track leading in the direction of the cave, but not right to it, starts at the town, near the hospital. The cave is on the east side of a stream running down from the first hill to stand out prominently from the Range.

The rock is a yellow laminated type which flakes fairly easily in horizontal plates about a quarter of an inch thick. Some of the painted surfaces have fallen away in this manner. Paintings have been made under a 6 ft. by 3 ft. ceiling surface (Plate 1, no. 1), and

under the long, low, horizontal surfaces at the back. Some of these are as low as 18 in. or so, and to see them, one must lie in the dust and fallen flakes and look upwards.

(b) *Subjects*. Boomerangs, in a variety of colour combinations, are the predominant motifs here. A count was made, revealing what appear to be 57 boomerangs, 23 human figures, 4 dingoes, 5 white circles, 2 white hands, 2 white kangaroo prints, and 1 red emu track. Some of the human figures have been partly covered by the bold, clear boomerangs of what would seem to be a more recent period. One of the dingoes has been drawn with a larger boomerang arched across its back.

On the vertical edges of rock are several rows of strokes, rather like parallel tally marks. I counted 291 of them. Of these, 220 are white on natural rock, 8 are red, 17 are white on a black background, and 46 are black on a whitened surface. Most strokes are about 4 in. long, and up to 1 in. wide (Plate 1, no. 2). Similar strokes have been drawn in small clusters among the other paintings.

(c) *Colour*. An interesting feature of this site is the range of colour, and the use of more than one colour in the same picture. One is used as an outline for the other. The colours used here are black, white, deep red, orange and grey. The combining of materials to make another colour, as in the case of grey, is not nearly as common among the Aborigines as the separate use of ochres, clay or charcoal (Davidson, 1936: 11).

Boomerangs have been drawn in the following colours or combinations:—white, orange, black, black with white outline, black with red outline, red with white outline, and white with black outline. Some of the human figures are grey, outlined in red, and others are red without outline.

(d) *Wall Recesses*. In the wall of the cave, mostly on the left, is a series of eleven holes which appear to have been dug in the rock, like miniature tunnels, 2 to 4 ft. deep. The entrances are about a foot high and up to 3 ft. wide (Plate 1, no. 2). The upper edges of these entrances are blackened, as if by smoke from a fire inside. The colour of the material in the tunnels does not suggest that the holes were dug to provide colouring material for the paintings. There might be a connection between the black at the openings and the black in the pictures, but there does not seem to be any good reason to connect the holes directly with the pictures.

I saw similar recesses on the west wall of Bee Gorge, a few hundred yards from the mouth. These showed no sign of smoke or other human interference, and I wondered if they were of animal origin or just the result of erosion. There were, however, smooth depressions made by grinding, only a few feet away, so there had certainly been human activity close by in this case, too.

(e) *Other Specimens*. Within the cave, on the floor, was a stone of a hard, greenish type. One side has a series of small pits as if it has been struck many times. A flake appears to have been struck from one edge.

Down the slope a bit, about 15 ft. from the entrance was a fragment of a baler shell (*Melo ?amphora*). This cave is about

120 miles from the sea, at the nearest point. These shells were formerly used by Aborigines as containers, and their presence so far inland is not unique. I found similar fragments a hundred miles up the Yule River, at Luke's Pool, and nearly 200 miles inland at Moolgawarra Creek, on Juna Downs Station. They seem to be evidence of trade between coastal and inland people, or of travel between these areas.

Eastern Gorge. Plate 2, nos. 1 and 2.

(a) *Location.* Eastern Creek runs into Wittenoom Gorge from the east, at the Administrative Settlement, about six miles south of the town. It is about a one hour walk from the mine dump at the back of the Settlement to the main gallery at the head of the gorge. Beyond the narrow waterfall, some two-thirds of the way, there are occasional figures, the biggest and clearest being an outline kangaroo. It is 7 ft. tall, from head to tail. The main gallery is a further five minutes' walk beyond this picture.

As with all rock paintings, those in a position where they are exposed to the weather are in poor condition, and it is difficult or impossible to identify many of the figures. Some are protected by overhanging ledges, or they are in deep recesses. These are still in good condition (Plate 2, no. 1).

(a) *Subjects.* The anthropomorphic figures mostly have long bodies, short limbs and long, radiating hair. In Plate 2, no. 1, a 6 in. ruler with alternate inches blackened indicates the scale. Just below the centre of this photo is a group of very rotund little figures. The other pictures include dingoes, lizards, men holding boomerangs, and a large number similar to these shown here. There are 164 distinguishable figures on the main, south wall.

Plate 2, no. 2 shows what appears to be a bird or bird-man. There are half a dozen or so of these here. The large eyes and the round head, particularly in some of the others, suggest an owl. On Hooley Station there are similar figures with a more bird-like tapering of the body between the legs. Those are painted in white. In the Dale's Gorge paintings, some of the heads are similar. It is interesting to note that south of the range near Mt. Tom Price, and at Black Hill Pool at the foot of the Tableland on the road to Roebourne, there are similar, though not identical figures in the engravings. There is a tradition among the Aborigines of the Woodstock Station area that the engravings were made by the White Owl people who were dead long before the modern brown men came. It is not known whether the bird-like figures gave rise to this belief, or whether they are evidence of a group of people referred to in that tradition.

(e) *Colour.* With the exception of one of the owl heads, painted in white, the figures in Eastern Gorge are all painted in orange ochre. Lumps of it can be picked up along the creek bed, on the way up. They appear to have been painted on after the ochre was mixed with a liquid medium. In the case of the 7 ft. kangaroo, it looks as though a recent visitor has renovated it to make a better photographic subject by using a lump of ochre as chalk, and tracing over the original which had been painted.



Plate 1.—No. 1—Part of the ceiling in the Wittenoom cave. No. 2—
Small, blackened tunnels, with white "tally" strokes above.

The use of only one colour at this site, and the great difference in style and subject matter, is in strong contrast to the cave only 5 or 6 miles away, at Wittenoom.

Rio Tinto Gorge. Plate 3, no. 1.

(a) *Location.* This is about 25 miles west of Wittenoom. A track from Hamersley Station to Wittenoom runs through this gorge, but it is still a watercourse, so the gorge is almost impassable.

The paintings are in a shallow cave or recess on the east side of the gorge, nearer to the southern end. A search in a side gorge on the west, a few hundred yards further north, revealed a few more faded remains.

(b) *Subject.* There are rows of little human figures, rather like chains of paper dolls. Some taller figures are over on the left, but these have been defaced by recent chalk sketches and initials. At the back of the recess is a newly-broken section of wall which contained more figures. It is said that this was blasted off by a man doing road construction work in the gorge.

(c) *Colour.* These are white, with a few streaks of red or crimson on some figures. This colouring can be seen best in the figure (?woman) on the left in the middle row (Plate 3, no. 1). The paintings in the side gorge are in orange.

(d) *Cave.* At the junction of the tributary and the main gorge is a cave about 10 ft. deep and 15 ft. wide. The remains of fires show that it has been used as a shelter, possibly by stockmen or prospectors, but excavation might show that it was used by Aborigines, too.

Powder Creek. Plate 3, no. 2.

(a) *Location.* Powder Creek is a tributary of the Yule River, on Hooley Station. There are other painting sites on this station, including the owls previously mentioned. This is also one of the most interesting engraving areas.

Apart from some very faded and doubtful remains on the sides of the gorge, there is only one well-preserved panel at Powder Creek. The forward tilt of the top of the rock surface has helped to protect it.

(b) *Subject.* The composition includes geometric and naturalistic elements, with the former superimposed over the latter. The most prominent elements are the concentric circles and the parallel bands of alternating colours radiating from another circular motif. On the left are the body and legs of a lizard or human form, and a heart-shaped outline.

(c) *Colour.* Red, yellow and white have been used. In their present condition, they are in rather soft, pale pastel tones. The lighter colours are alternated with the red for contrast.

Dale's Gorge.

(a) *Location.* This is about 40 miles south-east of Wittenoom. It is becoming very widely known as a tourist attraction, and hundreds of people visit it each year. The paintings are at the junction of the gorge and a small tributary downstream from the waterfall.



Plate 2.—No. 1—Orange figures on the ceiling and walls of the Eastern Gorge cave. No. 2—Bird-like figure in Eastern Gorge.

(b) *Subject.* There are about 80 simple, elongated human figures in a yellowish ochre. The style is not unlike some of the figures in Eastern Gorge. The only other creatures depicted are two snakes. There are also seven vertically striped oval shapes, possibly representing weapons or sacred objects. In addition there are about 170 yellow "tally" strokes and a further 80 in red.

Despite protection from the weather by an overhanging ledge, the paintings appear to be faded, the lower parts of some being very hard to see. Collapsing of the rock wall has also removed some of the paintings, as I was able to pick up a fragment bearing part of a row of red strokes.

Directly across on the south side of the gorge are the first of the intermittent groups of rather simple engraved figures, in a light yellowish stratum. These continue for about half a mile downstream. Here 167 separate figures were counted.

Gregory Gorge

(a) *Location.* This is on the Fortescue River, about 100 miles from the mouth, on the north-west corner of Millstream Station. Here the river forms a permanent pool for at least half a mile as it flows between the high, red cliffs, a hundred yards or so apart.

Nowhere else in the North-West did I see more abundant bird life. There were black swans, pelicans, several species of ducks, and many other water and smaller tree birds. I visited this site in early October. There is a track, suitable for 4-wheel drive vehicles, which runs through Daniel's Well Station (abandoned), to within about 4 or 5 miles of Gregory Gorge. Part of the remainder of the trip can be made in the vehicle but at least three miles must be walked, so this natural bird sanctuary seems fairly safe at present.

(b) *Subject.* There are mostly engravings here. They are at the eastern end of the north wall, but the majority are on the eastern half of the south side. Only two paintings were found, but these are important for two reasons. Firstly, they are a long way—about 90 miles—west of Wittenoom. All the other known paintings are within a 40-mile radius of that town. Secondly, the motifs at Gregory Gorge are geometric, rather than naturalistic. In this respect they are like those at Powder Creek, which is also outside the Hamersley Range.

One design includes two shapes rather like arrow heads, although they may depict emu or other bird prints. The only other painting seen here is very faded, but it includes vertical lines within a roughly circular outline.

Kalamina Gorge

(a) *Location.* This is about 8 miles east of Wittenoom Gorge. I had heard of a huge cave with a wide, sandy floor and Aboriginal pictures on the walls. It had been found about 1950 by two men looking for mining timber. It is not known whether this cave contains engravings, or paintings.

(b) *Subject.* A search of the gorge revealed only a group of 15 painted white strokes on the west side about a mile from the mouth,



Plate 3.—No. 1—Rows of white figures in Rio Tinto Gorge. No. 2—
Geometric pattern at Powder Creek.

and a single panel of half a dozen little engraved figures about two miles further in on the east side.

The cave has either collapsed, or I was in the wrong Gorge.

COMPARISON WITH ENGRAVINGS

On several occasions paintings were found within a few yards of engravings. This was the case at Powder Creek, Dale's Gorge and Gregory Gorge. Are they the work of the same people?

At each of these sites, the subject-matter and the styles of the engravings and the paintings are dissimilar. At both Powder Creek and Gregory Gorge the paintings are predominantly geometric designs, while the engravings are advanced naturalistic, and simple stylized human and animal figures, respectively. Only at Dale's Gorge are the subjects similar—human figures appearing in the paintings as well as the engravings—but the styles have little in common. The figures have different body proportions, and quite different heads. There is in all the paintings a complete absence of sexual themes, which are generally so prominent among the engravings. These observations seem to suggest that in at least the first two sites, the two art forms are the work of two different groups of people. As there is no satisfactory way of dating either the engravings or the paintings at present, it is not possible to tell which were made first, or how much time separates their origin.

How does the artistic merit of the paintings compare with that of the engravings in the area? The first point to make is that there is a very wide range of skill and complexity seen in examining the various engravings themselves. They range from simple stick figures to very fine stylized and naturalistic panels, which are seen at their best in the Hcoley and Woodstock Station areas. Even within these more spectacular areas, the whole range of artistic skill can be seen.

The paintings do not show anything like the same range, although this is not a limitation imposed by the nature of the medium itself. One might expect the reverse. Paint is easier and quicker to manipulate, than rock is to incise. The possibilities attainable, within the limits of the material available to the Aborigines can be seen in the now well-known bark paintings of Northern Australia (cf. Berndt, 1964). When compared with the cave paintings of the Kimberleys, where the Wandjina art reached a high standard, these near Wittenoom seem very minor efforts indeed.

Nevertheless, we must not confuse artistic merit with ritual significance. To the people who made them, these simple figures probably were no less important than the most impressive engravings or paintings. For the purpose of a ritual—and we presume that these paintings had a ritual purpose—a simple stick man could have been just as effective a symbol as a European-style masterpiece. For one reason or another, these artists did not attempt a high degree of naturalism. Crude and child-like they may seem to our eyes, schooled to appreciate quite different artistic conventions, but they are among our national art treasures, and as such, they deserve to be preserved.

INTERPRETATION

I was unable to obtain any information at all, from local Aborigines about the paintings, although there was at least some about

the engravings. The paintings are further from Roebourne, where I was stationed, and where I had my best contacts. I was not successful in finding any old people who had occupied the localities of the paintings. It is said that some station Aborigines deliberately avoid the hills and gorges of the Hamersley Range, as they fear this region.

PRESERVATION

Paintings are much less durable than engravings, as the former are far more susceptible to damage by weather and by vandals. The weather has left only a few paintings in the more sheltered recesses of the caves and gorge walls, and these will disappear rapidly as more and more people move into the area.

It is remarkable that the Wittenoom site appears to have suffered less than those in the more remote Eastern Gorge and Rio Tinto Gorge. Because of the relatively good condition and the variety in colour, the cave at Wittenoom is the most striking of the sites in the area, as well as being the easiest to reach. It would be a great pity if these, too, are damaged before some effective protection can be devised for them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This survey was the outcome of a conversation with Mr. Ian Crawford, of the W.A. Museum. He has given continuous guidance throughout the project and in the preparation of my reports. The Museum supplied some of the film in the first year of the study. During 1964 the survey was continued with the assistance of a grant from The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Many more engraving sites have now been recorded, particularly in the upper Yule River area. A full report is being prepared for the Institute, together with the hundreds of photographs taken.

The survey took me onto many different station properties. The people there have been most helpful. I would like to acknowledge particularly the hospitality and assistance given to me by Mr. K. Wilkin of Hamersley Station, Mr. T. Parsons of Hooley Station, and Mr. R. Collett at Woodstock Pastoral Research Station.

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ERRATUM

In Part 1 of this article (*W. Aust. Nat.*, 9 (5): 118) the words "Hamersley Station. Site 1. Fig. 6: Plate 5, no. 1; Plate 6, nos. 2 and 3" should read "Hamersley Station. Site 3. Plate 5, nos. 2, 3 and 4; Plate 6, no. 1."